

Funded
by the European Union
and the Council of Europe



COUNCIL OF EUROPE



Implemented
by the Council of Europe

EVALUATION OF THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE AND EUROPEAN UNION JOINT PROGRAMME 'ROMED'



COUNTRY FINDINGS BULGARIA

ROMED in Bulgaria

by **Nikolay Kirilov, country expert Bulgaria**

1.1 Introduction

According to the 2011 census, Bulgaria has 7,265 million inhabitants out of which 323,345 (4.8% of the total population) are people of Roma descent. The unofficial estimate is that the Roma of Bulgaria number between 700,000–800,000.

In recent decades, the Roma community in Bulgaria has faced difficult social exclusion challenges. Although the right to education is a basic human right, thousands of Roma children remain outside the education system. According to various institutions¹ 4.2% of children of school age do not attend school. Each year, nearly 18,000 children and youths drop out and leave school early, the number increasing with every subsequent educational level. The vast majority of Roma aged 18–24 leave education without obtaining a vocational or general upper secondary qualification and therefore lack an essential condition for participation in the labour market.

The infrastructure of Roma neighbourhoods is very poor – more than 40% of Roma live in houses without a water supply, 60% of houses are not connected to the central sewerage system and 80% have no indoor bathrooms. A number of neighbourhoods are outside of the city regulations and there is a serious problem of illegal housing construction. There are also serious issues with the health of Roma people and their access to healthcare services.

The National Roma Integration Strategy (NRIS) of the Bulgarian Government envisages a number of measures to address the structural problems of Roma social exclusion. The main challenge is the inadequate budget allocation for its implementation. A total of 71 out of 120 activities in the NRIS Action Plan are not budgeted for². A positive step in late 2015 was the opening of Roma-targeted operations within the Science and Education Operational Programme which dedicates, for the first time, relatively significant financial resources to Roma integration, covering pre-school, school, high school and adult education. The operations provide opportunities for the engagement of diverse stakeholders - schools, municipalities, NGOs and universities. However, funding distribution is on a highly competitive basis and this is a challenge for the small municipalities in the greatest need of support for Roma inclusion initiatives, whose capacities are limited.

There is also a clear tendency of the decreasing political participation of Roma. The number of Roma city councillors at municipal level (between 100 and 200) was higher after the elections in 1999, 2003 and 2007 and decreased sharply after the 2011 elections (between 50 and 100)³.

Another alarming tendency is the deterioration of the overall public environment for Roma inclusion. In the past three years, there has been a significant rise in anti-Roma rhetoric and stereotypes, as well as anti-Roma clashes at local level, which have not been properly addressed by Bulgarian institutions.

¹ <https://www.unicef.bg/bg/themes/36>; http://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra-2014_roma-survey_education_tk0113748enc.pdf;

http://www.romaeducationfund.hu/sites/default/files/publications/bg_country_assessment_2015_web.pdf

² http://amalipe.com/files/publications/amalipe_assesment_NRIS_2015.pdf

³ Roma in Bulgaria Information Guide, OSI Sofia 2008 (Ромите в България. Информационен справочник, институт „Отворено общество“ – София, 2008) and data from NGO research

1.2 ROMED1 key findings

1.2.1 Relevance

In the context of Bulgaria, intercultural mediation has a long history. Practices of health mediators and teacher assistants were piloted by a number of NGOs in the 1990s. The most successful experience was that of the health mediators, where pilot models of NGOs were expanded by large scale PHARE programmes and led to the institutionalisation of the position of health mediators. There is a national standard for the training of new health mediators: they are included in the NRIS as one of the successful practices in the country and there is a budget allocated by the Ministry of Finance for their remuneration. Since 2007, the national programme “Activating the inactive persons” has provided support to employment mediators.

Based on interviews with national and local stakeholders, ROMED1 is considered to be relevant to the needs of the country in several ways. Firstly, it provides the opportunity for upgrading the skills of practicing mediators in functional competencies that are usually missing in other trainings, focusing mostly on specific skills in the sector of work of mediators. Secondly, ROMED1 also reached out to employment mediators, who had not had as many opportunities for training as the health mediators. Last but not least, it brought back the focus of national institutions onto the importance of Roma mediators and their professional development. As mediators are already a well-established practice in the country, there is less attention on the development of systems for further upgrading their skills and for addressing the need of adopting the practice of mediators in other sectors such as education, where they are needed so much.

1.2.2 Efficiency and effectiveness of the ROMED1 training process

Organisation and implementation of the ROMED training

Over the period 2011-2014, ROMED1 provided training to 163 mediators, 154 of whom received ROMED1 training certificates. The distribution of mediators who completed the Programme and received certificates per year of training and type of mediator is presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Distribution of certified mediators in Bulgaria 2011-2014⁴

Year	Number of mediators	Women	Type of mediator	Number of locations
2011	14	11	Employment	13
2011	14	6	Health	13
2012	29	19	14 employment; 15 health	29 ⁵
2014	96	62	6 health; 31 school; 59 ⁶ employment	55

⁴ The data comes from the internal database on the ROMED1 training in all countries provided by the Council of Europe. Lists of participants per country are for mediators that completed the courses

⁵ Only the health mediators noted their address, the 14 employment mediators had either an unknown location or did not provide an address

⁶ At least ten of the employment mediators participated in the previous ROMED training in 2011-2012

Totals	153	98		76 ⁷
--------	-----	----	--	-----------------

This data shows that the training included diverse groups of mediators. Out of the 153 certified mediators, 35 were health mediators, 87 employment mediators and 31 school mediators. More than half were women (64%).

There is a significant difference in the training programmes over time. Those implemented in 2011-2012 followed the complete training cycle of ROMED1. It resulted in 57 mediators who received ROMED1 certificates for completed courses. These training programmes included two sessions and a period of six months of practice in between. The overall work was coordinated by the National Focal Point (NFP), Mr Deyan Kolev, who is also the leader of the Amalipe Intercultural Centre, one of the leading Roma organisations in the country.

The training in 2014 was matched to the opportunity provided by the project “The Vulnerable Empowered” of the “Diverse and Equal” Roma association, funded by the NGO Programme of the EEA and Norway Grants with 17,883.64 EUR and aimed to train 102 mediators (health, school and employment) based on the ROMED methodology⁸. This training was developed as a much shorter version of the ROMED1 methodology and consisted of a three-day session for each of the four mixed groups of mediators organised in four different districts in the country. It did not include a period of six months’ practice and a follow-up second training of the same groups. The financial contribution of ROMED1 covered the cost of the trainers and the adaptation of the methodology for this shorter version of the training. ROMED1 issued certificates for 97 of the participating mediators.

From the interview with the “Diverse and Equal Association”, we did not receive any details on the participation of institutions and the follow-up to this training in terms of further promotion of the position of mediator. For this reason, the main findings of the ROMED1 Programme in Bulgaria relate to the core group of 57 mediators who were trained in 2011-2012 and received certificates for completing full courses and practice, as per the ROMED1 methodology.

The selection of mediators for the full ROMED training in 2011-2012 was done in close cooperation with the National Council for Cooperation on Ethnic and Integration Issues (NCCEII), which is the CAHROM National Contact Point in Bulgaria. Based on the interview with the NCCEII, they were consulted throughout the implementation of the Programme. This cooperation led to mobilising the involvement of other national institutions like the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy and the Ministry of Healthcare, as well as the National Network of Health Mediators in Bulgaria (NNHM). The employment mediators were selected by the National Employment Agency of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy.

Feedback of mediators on the effectiveness of ROMED training

Based on the two focus groups with trained mediators (one focus group with health mediators and another with employment mediators), the feedback on the usefulness of the ROMED1 training is very positive. The most valuable aspect was that the Programme focused on the role of the mediators and the human rights and empowerment perspectives of their work, which are lacking in other training for mediators. The involvement of institutions in some of the training days was also considered as useful and raised the profile of the mediators, however it was insufficient to ensure sustained understanding of the mediators’ work and to influence the improvement of employment conditions.

⁷ Some of the municipalities from the 2014 training are the same as those in the training from 2011-2012

⁸ <http://ngogrants.bg/public/portfolios/proposal.cfm?id=49&applicantLevelID=3844&prID=14>

Feedback on the approach used by the ROMED trainers was very positive. They were knowledgeable about the local contexts and succeeded in “translating” the general methodology to respond to the local specificities. Mediators also valued the interactive way in which training sessions were conducted, allowing for sharing of practical cases from their everyday work. All mediators agreed that the idea of having six months’ practice was very good, but none of them considered that they received the required mentoring and support during this practice.

The main challenges to the effectiveness of the training were outlined in two areas. The first was the diversity of the mediators who participated, especially in terms of level of experience and previous capacity-building. The second challenge is rooted in the nature of work of the employment mediators. Based on their job description, they do not have field work and direct interaction with communities. They function more as an administration service to register the unemployed. From this perspective, it was difficult for them to apply the ROMED method in practice. Advocacy is needed for revising their job description and including field work as part of their tasks.

1.2.3 Outcomes and impacts

Contribution to the professional development of mediators and their recognition

Based on the focus groups with mediators, ROMED1 contributed to the development of their functional capacities for more effective communication with institutions and with the community, as well as increased knowledge of human rights and the functioning of the institutions at local, national and international level. This, together with knowledge of the multiple aspects of the role of mediators, was viewed as the training’s main added value.

In terms of the “neutral role” of mediators and their impartiality in working with institutions and the community, most of the mediators shared that this is very difficult to achieve because they are employed by these institutions and are part of their staff. They have job descriptions to follow and, especially in the case of labour mediators, the job descriptions do not provide for field work directly in communities.

Participants of the focus groups did not refer to the Code of Ethics as a factor that contributed to better employment conditions; they valued the Council of Europe and European Union certification, but it made no direct contribution to changing the attitude of local institutions. They also pointed out that it took a long time after the training to receive the ROMED1 certificate.

As outlined in the focus groups, the recognition of local institutions remains a difficult task and, in some cases, it takes years to prove the beneficial effect of the work of mediators. For health mediators, critical to obtaining this recognition and ensuring that they are engaged only in mediation work is the support of the NNHM, which acts as a watchdog organisation and reacts immediately when cases of deviation or misuse of mediators are reported.

In terms of employment, the majority of the health and employment mediators continue to work. All of them were employed when they joined the ROMED1 training – health mediators on permanent contracts and labour mediators on temporary contracts renewed on an annual basis in the framework of the national programme “Activating the inactive people”. Based on the interviews with the NNHM, more than 70% of the mediators trained by ROMED1 are still working in their municipalities. There are different reasons as to why some of the mediators have since left their jobs. A few have decided to move abroad and look for better income opportunities. Others have continued their education in universities to pursue improved professional development. The NNHM also outlined a growing

tendency of “removing” health mediators for political reasons, especially after elections, when the new administration wants to hire people closer to them.

We did not succeed in obtaining concrete data on the employment status of employment mediators, as their network is less well-developed and they do not have such a database. However, it was reported that there is a much higher turnover among employment mediators due to unstable labour conditions (temporary contracts), as well as a very low pay (common for all mediators) at the minimum wage level of the country. Due to this, a number of employment mediators have left their jobs and are moving to other countries in search of a better income.

Contribution to increased access to services in communities

Based on all interviews and focus groups, the mediators have an important contribution to make in increasing the access of Roma communities to various services in the locations where they are working. However, systematised data on this impact over a longer period of time is missing. As outlined by respondents, a serious problem is that there is no system of monitoring the impacts of the work of mediators as one of the measures of the NRIS for Roma inclusion.

Based on the reports developed by the NFP for the six month period of ROMED practice in 2011-2012, the health mediators assisted 844 people for routine immunisation and 772 for health screening, resolved 2,111 individual health cases and 2,268 social ones. They also provided support to 581 people from risk groups, including pregnant women and young mothers, as well as information on prevention of various diseases to 1,197 people through events and campaigns. Employment mediators registered and contributed to the employment of 281 unemployed people.

Due to the fact that the ROMED1 Training of Mediators Programme has ended in Bulgaria, there is no follow-up system to monitor the continuous effect of the work of the trained mediators in terms of increased access to services.

On a broader scale, the impact of the work of mediators can be illustrated with data provided by the NNHM which gathers systematised information from its members (195 health mediators, only 30 of whom were trained by ROMED1). Based on its annual report for 2015, the 195 health mediators provided 130,657 services to Roma individuals and families, as well as organising information campaigns. The majority of these services relate to healthcare prophylactic exams, immunisation campaigns, prevention campaigns, health literacy and information, reproductive health, campaigns and work with families for prevention of early marriages, and assisting people with documentation and health insurance, etc. Over the ten-year period of the work of the mediators, the level of immunisation of children in Roma settlements increased from very low to 90% at present.

A good development is that currently the NNHM is working together with the Ministry of Healthcare to establish a uniform reporting system on monitoring the results of the work of health mediators, which will be sent to municipalities.

Impact at the national level

ROMED1 was well promoted at the national level by the NFP and the Programme was implemented in good cooperation with the relevant key national stakeholders – the National Council for Cooperation on Ethnic and Integration Issues (NCCEII), the Ministries of Labour and Social Policy and of Healthcare, as well as the National Network of Health Mediators in Bulgaria.

The NFP made special efforts to promote changes in the role of employment mediators, especially with the inclusion of direct field work in the communities as part of their job description. These included piloting field work practice in some municipalities (based on another of Amalipe’s project), as

well as numerous meetings with relevant national institutions. However, these efforts did not result in revising the employment mediators' job description.

The NFP was very successful in advocating at the National Employment Agency in order to end the trend of reducing the number of employment mediators employed practically by the national programme "Activating the inactive people". Although the initial aim of the programme was to hire at least 100 mediators, at the early stages of ROMED in 2011, their number had dropped to 59. Due to the active involvement of the NFP in 2012, the Agency increased the number to 96. However, at present the number of employment mediators has again dropped to around 60.

The NFP contributed directly to initiating the establishment of the new National Network of Labour Mediators, supporting, through one of Amalipe's projects, the initiation meeting of 18 employment mediators held in Veliko Turnovo in 2013. However, this new network did not receive follow-up support for its development as such resources were missing both in the ROMED1 and Amalipe Programmes.

ROMED1 did not make any contribution to the further development of the National Network of Health Mediators, which is also responsible for the training programme organised and accredited by the Government's educational institutions. More direct work with this network could have helped mainstream some of the ROMED training aspects amongst all health mediators in Bulgaria. The NNHM participated only as a resource for selecting participants for the initial training in 2011-2012, based on the suggestion of the CAHROM National Contact Point.

By providing training resources (curriculum and trainers) to the above-mentioned project of the Roma NGO "Diverse and Equal", ROMED technically increased its outreach to 97 more trained mediators, however the anticipated scale-up effect from this project seems to be missing. Some of the trained mediators did not get recognition as they do not cover established standards for their training and qualification (former health mediators). "Diverse and Equal" has formally registered a new network of teacher assistants (school mediators), but it exists only in terms of court registration and has no activities. The profession of school mediators is still not recognised. As "Diverse and Equal" deals with other projects as well, it has no follow-up work in support of mediators.

1.2.4 Sustainability

The professions of health and employment mediators are officially recognised, although the former is better established. Professional standards have been developed and health mediators are hired on long-term contracts by the municipalities which are funded by the Ministry of Finance. Municipalities have to pay for the training of new mediators which is delivered by accredited educational institutions and monitored by the National Network of Health Mediators. The main vulnerability in terms of sustainability is that there are no funds allocated from the Government for upgrading the training of hired mediators, which is considered as very important for the improvement of their work. So far, this has relied instead on project funds raised by the NNHM, most recently from a four-year international project with Glaxo SmithKline. As this project ends in 2017, the continuation of systematic upgrading of training of mediators will be challenging. The NNHM will need help to continue its effective advocacy work so that at least some core governmental support is allocated to the ongoing training of existing mediators.

There are no funds available for the training of employment mediators. The newly-established National Network of Labour Mediators needs further support to grow its capacity. The established network of teacher assistants/ school mediators exists only on paper and is not active in practice.

1.3 ROMED2 key findings

1.3.1 Relevance

All stakeholders participating in the evaluation, especially at local level, consider that ROMED2 is very relevant to the needs of Roma inclusion. Its main value is that it puts the empowerment of the Roma community at the centre of the work and aims to create sustainable mechanisms for its active participation in local development processes. By providing concrete instruments for interaction between the local authorities and organised community representatives in Community Action Groups (CAGs), it addresses an important need for expanding the local capacities for inclusive good governance in multi-ethnic communities.

ROMED2 came to the country at a very strategic moment of planning of the strategies, plans and programmes for applying the principles of cohesive regional policies for the period 2014-2020, as well as of drafting of the National Development Programme 2014-2020. One of the main principles for applying the instruments for regional development relates to overcoming all forms of discrimination in the process of planning and implementing regional strategies and plans. The ROMED2 approach provided local authorities with a tool to put into practice the necessary consultative process in the preparation of the local development plans. It also ensured the direct participation of the Roma community in this process by increasing their capacities to identify and constructively suggest the most important problems to be considered by the new development plans.

1.3.2 Efficiency and effectiveness of assisted local processes

The ROMED2 Programme was launched in Bulgaria simultaneously with the ROMACT Programme in late October 2013.

The Roma association “Integro” was selected as the National Support Organisation (NSO) and its leader as the National Project Officer (NPO). Integro is one of the leading organisations in the country, with years of experience in initiating and testing new community-based approaches for integrated development in Roma communities. The National Focal Point (NFP) and national facilitators are experts with a lot of experience in working on various initiatives of Roma inclusion, especially at local level.

Selection of municipalities

Selection of municipalities to participate in ROMED2/ROMACT was carried out by the National Support Team in cooperation with the Open Society Institute, which was implementing the “Making the Most of the European Funds” (MERI) programme of OSF Budapest. Selection was based on the following criteria: the political will of the local government, the diversity of municipalities (in size and share of Roma population), previous experience of work on programmes for Roma inclusion, presence of active people in the Roma community and presence of working mediators (where possible trained by ROMED1).

The six selected ROMED2/ROMACT municipalities are very diverse in size, type, share of Roma population, history of work on Roma inclusion and level of economic development opportunities. Two of them are rural municipalities (Muglitzh and Tudzha), three are medium-sized cities (Byala Slatina, Sliven and Shumen), the latter two with a high percentage of Roma, and one is a large city (Varna). The municipalities are also very diverse in their history of successful policies and initiatives in Roma inclusion. In the majority of rural municipalities and medium-sized cities, Roma communities are also

very diverse – some living in Roma neighbourhoods in urban areas, others in smaller or larger communities in a number of villages surrounding a town acting as a municipal centre. In some municipalities, like Sliven, the two urban Roma neighbourhoods are very different, with little potential for cooperation between them.

Based on the interviews with stakeholders, there was no clarity on the vision for success and to what extent using the same approach and timeline could meet the expectations for success in all places with such diverse contexts. Last but not least, the six municipalities were selected to serve both ROMED2 and ROMACT. The two programmes started and ran simultaneously but with a different purpose and focus – ROMED2 is focused on community empowerment, while ROMACT's priority is the expanded capacity of municipalities for project generation. These different expectations for success require different resources, such as type of expertise, time and funding.

Development of the CAGs

The CAGs were established in the first quarter of 2014, with the exception of Sliven where the process took longer and so the group was established later. The identification of the members of the groups was carried out by the National Support Team with the help of active mediators and active people in the community.

The groups differed in the number of people involved in the six municipalities and over time. While initially the CAGs were larger, varying between ten and 24 members, later in 2015 a tendency to see a decreased number of active members was outlined in the written reports of the NPO and confirmed in the interviews with the national team (with between five and ten core group members regularly attending CAG meetings). An exception was the CAG in Tundzha which remained comparatively stable - we met 17 people actively involved in the CAG.

Based on the case studies in two of the municipalities (Tundzha and Byala Slatina), as well as individual interviews with CAG members from other locations, the main motivation of the people to join the groups was to contribute to tangible changes in the life of their communities. An especially strong driver was the future of their children and their education, in order to offer them a better future.

CAGs are very diverse in terms of capacity, level of development, extent of sustained motivation for participation and outreach to the broader Roma communities. The effectiveness of their development depended on a number of interrelated factors – the specificities of the local Roma communities, level of experience in previous citizen action, experience and approach of the national facilitators and consistency of their presence to support the group, as well as the extent to which the interaction with local authorities brought tangible results or faced difficulties.

In some CAGs, like Tundzha, there was a shared and sustained motivation due to a positive set of factors – a good national facilitator, an open local authority, good representation of the diverse Roma communities from all villages in the municipality, as well as a shared vision of the CAG and the municipality for future development organised around education.

In other CAGs there were a number of difficulties, some relating to the challenge of representativeness of the CAGs of the diversity of local Roma communities:

- ***Organising one CAG in large and diverse urban Roma communities faced difficulties.*** An example is Sliven, where there is little communication between the two very different neighbourhoods. This made it difficult to organise one CAG representing the interests of both. The

National Support Team had to get involved in conflict resolution among the members of the CAGs representing the two communities.

- **Organising one CAG to represent the interests of Roma communities in different locations within the municipality.** If, as in the case of Tundzha, the CAG was established by representatives of all Roma communities in the surrounding villages, in most of the other locations, members of the CAGs were mostly from urban neighbourhoods and representatives from the surrounding villages were not involved. This reduced the possibility of including them in the process of identifying needs and priorities for the local development plans.
- Last but not least, **the participation of local Roma NGOs in the CAGs also had different effects.** In cases like Tundzha, the local NGO “Patients with no Asthma” became a stimulus for the development of the CAG, whilst in Sliven the strong local NGO leaders were sometimes counterproductive to the strengthening of the CAG. In other places like Byala Slatina, the CAG had no communication with other local NGOs, which did not contribute to the effectiveness of either the CAG or the local NGOs.

A second group of challenges relates to the efficiency of the Programme itself, which is further outlined in the next section of the report.

In terms of linkage of the CAGs with the broader community, practices were also different. Based on the focus groups with the CAGs in the two municipalities, one of the good practices (well-established in Tundzha and at an earlier stage in Byala Slatina) was organising meetings with diverse interest groups, such as women and young people, to discuss their proposals and include them in the local community plan.

Interaction with local authorities

With the exception of Varna, the interaction between the CAG and the local authorities was constructive and beneficial. Varna, the largest municipality in ROMED/ROMACT, was excluded from the Programme. This was due to the growing resentment of the local council towards the Programme, increased conflicts and protests against Roma projects and, finally, the decision of the municipality not to adopt the local strategy for Roma integration. Without such a strategy the municipality cannot be eligible to apply under Operational Programmes. Another problem was that Varna is a very large city and it is questionable whether the establishment of only one CAG could effectively influence the challenging local processes, or if a broader coalition of a set of CAGs and organisations was needed to provide for greater representation of the Roma community.

Based on the two case studies, the local authorities were open to effective dialogue and cooperation with the CAGs and supportive to the ROMED/ROMACT process. They established institutional working groups and the municipal contact points were effective and cooperative. In Tundzha especially we saw a committed team of local administration supported by the mayor and his deputy and involving all key departments of the administration. They all work towards a common vision organised around education as a key engine for the development of the communities and for the future of the municipality.

In all municipalities except for Varna, the proposals developed by the CAGs were considered and included in the local development plans for 2012-2020. This is a great success of the Programme.

At the same time, this overall positive development of the interaction between the CAGs and the local authorities faced challenges linked to the political context. Low involvement at the political level of municipalities (the local councils) was noted in the ROMED/ROMACT reports as an obstacle in a number of municipalities (Varna, Sliven and Shumen). Even in Tundzha, which has a good record in

work for Roma inclusion over a number of years, the newly-elected local council has not approved the budget for the administration and is not so supportive of Roma-related initiatives.

A factor that negatively affected the local processes was the increasing anti-Roma discourse of the campaigns around the early parliamentary elections in October 2014, as well as the local elections in October 2015. Even in places where the local administration cooperated with local Roma communities, representatives had to "hide" this more positive attitude if they wanted to be re-elected by a majority of voters negatively motivated by anti-Roma slogans.

Efficiency of support and resources provided

A main factor that led to reduced motivation of the CAGs and reduced effectiveness of the local processes was the frequent change of facilitators (for example, in Byala Slatina), as well as the interruption of the Programme in 2015 when, for more than six months, the national facilitators were not contracted and resources for travel and support for CAG meetings were absent.

The main shortfall of the Programme was the very limited support given to the local activities and meetings of the CAGs. As outlined by the NPOs, *"we had in the budget money for the rental of meeting rooms, of multimedia and computers in order to show slides and educate the CAGs. Instead we could have invested this resource in the group"*. A small amount of funding in support of community initiatives of the CAGs could have helped the process of empowerment and trust of the broader community.

1.3.3 Outcomes and impact

Impacts on empowerment of communities

The main impact of the Programme towards the empowerment of Roma communities was the creation of the CAGs. This contributed to the individual empowerment of their members and, in some cases (for example in Tudzha), CAG members decided to continue their education in order to assume their new positions of people responsible for dialogue with institutions. Involvement in the groups increased the self-esteem of the participating Roma community members, who could have a say in the future development of their localities.

For many CAG members, this was the first opportunity to directly participate in the preparation of the local development plans. The Programme contributed to increasing their capacity to interact with local authorities and institutions and to developing collective demands for key issues that need to be improved. The increased recognition by local authorities of the CAGs as a real partner for identifying the issues and resolving urgent problems in the community made the members of the CAG feel like important actors in the local processes. At the same time, the members of the CAG still do not feel confident enough that they are at the level of equal partnership with the municipality and, in the majority of locations, they need the support of the national facilitators and the National Support Team to effectively maintain this interaction.

The CAG members are also turning into role models for the local communities and, by resolving concrete issues through consultation with people, they are gaining trust and respect and are modelling a new type of active citizenship behaviour.

Concrete results and impacts in communities

The local development plans follow the priorities of the strategies for Roma inclusion in the areas of education, healthcare, housing and employment. The priorities developed by most of the CAGs and

adopted by the plans also follow these areas, outlining the most urgent problems to be resolved in the short term as well as long-term priorities for development. Some of the suggested initiatives have already started to bring visible results and changes in the Roma neighbourhoods, even though development plans were adopted only in 2014, and the actual possibility of applying for funding from the Operational Programmes started later in 2015. Some examples of planned or implemented initiatives are listed below:

- **Byala Slatina:** *Resolved infrastructural problems:* cleaning of the neighbourhood, installed street bumps and street lights, installed electric meters and resolved problems with electric company. *In the area of education:* renovated building for primary school (project for early childhood development "Me and my family" supported by the MLPS).
- **Maglitz:** *Resolved infrastructural issues:* provision of street lights, refuse containers, cleaning of drainage ditches in the Roma neighbourhood. *In the area of access to education:* renovated building for primary school (project for early childhood development "Me and my family" supported by the MLPS). *In the area of access to healthcare,* one health mediator was employed.
- **Shumen:** *Resolved infrastructural issues:* an illegal dumpsite located between two of the neighbourhoods was removed, street lights were repaired. *In the area of education:* ensured control of the school inspectorate for the school attendance of children; project for educational attendance of children developed, but not funded.
- **Sliven:** *Resolved infrastructural issues:* the removal of the illegal dumpsite in one of the neighbourhoods and its replacement by a playground. *In the area of education:* ensured transport of Roma children from one of the neighbourhoods to another area as a measure for school desegregation of Roma children.
- **Tundzha:** *Resolved infrastructural problems:* renovated more than ten streets in the Roma neighbourhoods in eight villages; installed street lights, resolved the problem with access to running water in one of the villages; built a playground for children; started procedures for the legalisation of Roma houses in the neighbourhoods. *In the area of education:* consistent work following the long-term strategy in education; built a new kindergarten for 47 children, a new school in one of the villages to ensure access of children from surrounding villages; eight school mediators employed on a project basis; 77 elderly people joined second chance education courses and are graduating from secondary school.

Impacts on policies at the national level

The main impact of the Programme is the changing of local policies by including the requests of Roma communities in the local development plans for 2014-2020. As these plans were the backbone of the development of the National Development Plan 2014-2020 and the national programmes, ROMED/ROMACT has influenced the regional and national policies indirectly from the bottom up.

The National Support Organisation, Integro, promoted the Programme at all national meetings and through its involvement in national bodies and committees. However, in spite of these efforts, institutions at national level like the NCEDII did not feel consulted and informed about the Programme.

Sustainability

The timeframe of the actual implementation of the project is very short (less than two years) in order to ensure sustainability of the processes initiated. The CAGs are very promising but will need assistance in identifying the best way of sustaining their work. Some are discussing establishing NGOs, but they will need to develop capacities to keep the participatory approach and principles of their work and to grow as community-based organisations.

Local authorities have started to recognise the importance of the involvement of Roma communities, but further work will be needed to sustain the political will for cooperation in the long term. Risk factors will be elections and increasing negatively-motivated votes, anti-Roma rhetoric and further discriminatory attacks against Roma in the country.

1.4 Lessons and recommendations

1.4.1 ROMED1

- The main lesson from ROMED1 is that, if sustainable improvement of the employment conditions of mediators is desired, **a more consistent strategy and allocation of resources will be needed that link training activities with potential advocacy objectives**; otherwise the Programme risks remaining fragmented and with reduced impact at national level.
- Matching support to a short-term project that delivered several more training programmes to mediators is good for expanding the outreach of the Programme, but **more strategic partnerships with NGOs or other actors are needed to achieve longer-term and sustained impact**.
- To sustain the impact of the Programme, **ROMED1 should consider providing targeted support to the development of the networks of mediators** to increase their capacity for sharing of learning and peer support, as well as joint advocacy of both older and newly-established networks for consistent capacity-building of employed mediators.

1.4.2 ROMED2

- The main lesson from ROMED2 is that **empowerment of Roma communities is a long-term process and requires more time to bring sustainable results** than the timeframe of a project of less than two years' duration. Investment in empowerment will require several stages - initiation, growth and phasing out - with a clear definition of desired changes and indicators of success.
- **This process is diverse among communities and requires a diversified approach and more time for the formation of the CAGs**. Much more in-depth analysis of the diversity of local Roma communities is needed at the initial stage. Better representation of the different groups and neighbourhoods is critical for the success of the local process. The approach can be adapted by forming more than one CAG to better address their interests, especially in big cities/towns with a lack of communication between the different Roma communities. This will also require facilitation to stimulate the joint work among the different CAGs or community-based interest groups.
- **A clear strategy for phasing in and phasing out of communities is needed in order to guide the process more strategically**. At present, there is no clarity in terms of desired success and sustainability, who will take the responsibility for the continuation of the processes initiated and in what way. Transfer of the ROMED2 processes to the ROMACT Programme since 2015 completely shifted the focus from community empowerment to capacity development of institutions for project generation.
- **The investment in the Community Action groups in the first six municipalities of ROMED2 should continue for at least two more years** as, at present, the groups and the local processes are still not sustainable.
- **In the next phase, ROMED2 needs to continue to support the successful models already showing a visible impact**. This will help sustain these models and use relevant local

stakeholders – the local administration and CAG – as partners in assisting other municipalities in starting or expanding local Roma inclusion processes.

- ***Better involvement of the national CAHROM National Contact Point*** can help the strategic coherence of the local efforts of ROMED2 with other national programmes.
- ***There is a need to develop a process and impact monitoring system*** that can assist in extracting lessons for use in disseminating the approach to other places.
- ***More resources need to be allocated at the local level in support of the CAGs, including a small seed fund*** for actions generated by the community that will increase its capacity and trust in the process, as well as serve as a basis for attracting other resources.
- ***Dissemination of ROMED2 to new localities needs to be carried out in a strategic way*** with clarity of the selection criteria and a strategy for the timescale and desired sustainability of the intervention. Strategic partnerships and alliances with networks of other Roma NGOs, as well as with the National Network of the Municipalities in Bulgaria, can help in this process.